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# Morocco checks revolt with 1,500-mile earth wall

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MAHBAS, Morocco—From the air, Morocco's "Great Wall" against the Polisario guerrillas runs like a thin, brown welt across the vast gray emptiness of the Sahara, fading into the mirages that shimmer on the horizon.

It runs for more than 1,500 miles, from the Algerian border in the northeast, snaking south, then west along the Mauritanian frontier toward the Atlantic Ocean through desert so desolate and hot that cameras won't work, crows won't fly and stones are scorched black from the sun.

There, amid the Sahara's sandy void, the 9-foot-high earthen rampart bristles with space-age antipersonnel radar, seismic sensors, artillery, mines and mechanized infantry units.

And for the first time in a decade, Western military experts say, the wall is turning the tide of the war against the Polisario Front in Morocco's favor.

"There is no precedent in history for this wall," said Brig. Gen. Abdelaziz Bennani, commander of Morocco's southern front and the main architect of the wall strategy.

On a 136-degree day this week, a few Western correspondents were given a rare tour of the defense line, which consists of hundreds of strong points spaced at about 2-mile intervals along the elevated sand embankment. Each strong point protects its neighbor with overlapping fire while small mechanized units have been deployed nearby to intercept any Polisario guerrillas who manage to reach the wall.

"Therein lies the beauty of it

all," Bennani said. "With few means, we are maintaining sufficient strength all along the wall. ... It obliges the Polisario to engage our forces on our terms. When they try it, they will get something they never bargained for."

The last time the Polisario soldiers reportedly tried to breach the wall in strength was last October, when Moroccan troops proved the general's point with deadly efficiency.

An armored column tripped off sensors and radar alarms as it approached the wall, then was caught in a cross-fire that left scores of guerrillas dead and more than two dozen vehicles destroyed or captured.

Since then, the Moroccan command says, the guerrillas have kept their distance, harassing the wall occasionally with shellfire, then quickly retreating before Moroccan radar traces their position.

"We can precisely detect a man, a vehicle, even a dog up to a distance of 50 kilometers [30 miles]," said Col. Abid Tria, a commander along the wall.

Only a year ago, the Polisario guerrillas claimed control over two-thirds of the former Spanish Sahara, which Morocco annexed in 1975.

When Morocco completes the western sector of the wall to the Atlantic in about 10 days, Western military experts say the guerrillas will hold less than one-third of the former Spanish colony.

Morocco based its annexation on the historical ties between Morocco and the region's Sahrawi tribes. The Polisario Front opposes any foreign rule. It has fought first the Spanish and now the Moroccans

for an independent Sahrawi state. More than 60 countries support the Polisario claim.

With its use of U.S. and French state-of-the-art electronic surveillance equipment, the wall has attracted the attention of both U.S. and Soviet military experts as one of the few successful applications of technology against guerrilla insurgencies.

Moroccan authorities would not disclose the cost of constructing the wall, but Western military experts estimate it at \$10 million.

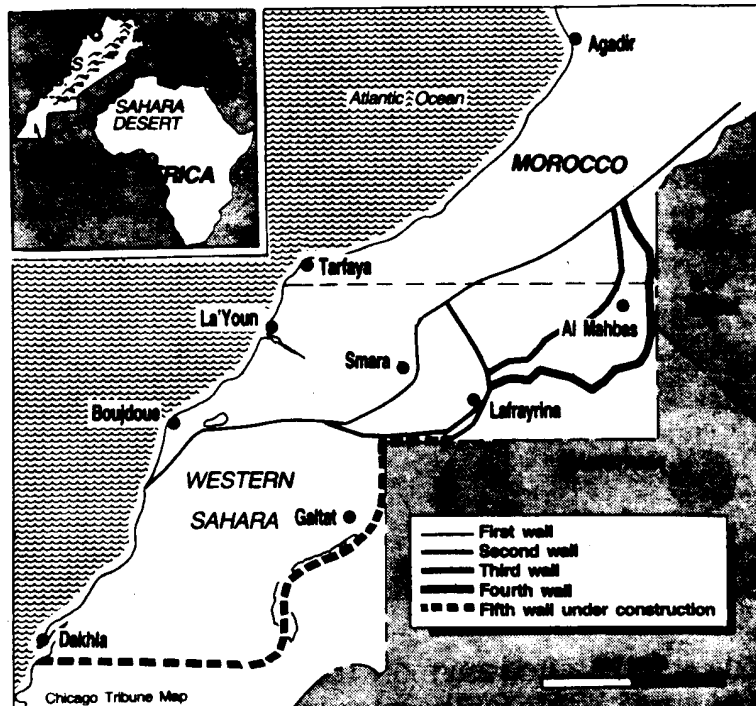
The wall itself has been moving forward steadily since construction

began in 1980. Some sections now are more than 600 miles farther south than the original ramparts. Moroccan commanders say they are advancing the wall lest they be outflanked by the growing Polisario sophistication in weapons and training, supplied by Algeria.

Algeria and King Hassan II's Morocco have been enemies ever since the Algerian revolution began preaching against Arab monarchies. Morocco is a close friend of the U.S., which has provided \$143 million in economic and military aid each year since 1980.

Unlike most other guerrilla or-

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ganizations, which depend on light weapons, sabotage and the support of local people, the Polisario Front has been fighting more of a conventional war with normal weapons along Morocco's borders.

"The nature of the rebellion has changed," Bennani said. "Before it was a matter of insurgents on foot and in Jeeps. Now it's a matter of insurgents using tanks and SAM-6 missiles. The wall has been adapted to the new situation."

Polisario guerrillas used a SAM-6 missile in October, 1981, to shoot down a Moroccan C-130 military transport plane along the Algerian border.

According to the latest Moroccan intelligence reports, the estimated 5,000 Polisario soldiers have about 120 Soviet-made T-55 tanks and BMP armored personnel carriers, 60 "Stalin organ" Katyusha rocket-launchers, nine 122 mm. artillery pieces, nine 160 mm. mortars and a SAM-6 missile battery protecting training camps south of Tindouf in eastern Algeria near the Moroccan border.

The intelligence estimates said all the weaponry was supplied by Algeria.

In addition to the Tindouf bases, Moroccan intelligence has placed the other main concentrations of Polisario forces south of the Mauritanian town of Ifachlen and at Nikijir, 90 miles east of the south Sahara port city of Dakhla.

Morocco scored a big diplomatic coup last August when it formed a political union with Libya—until then one of the main Polisario arms suppliers. Since then, Moroccan intelligence confirms that Libya has cut off all arms shipments to the guerrillas, leaving them totally dependent on Algeria

for support.

"The Moroccans saw the union as a brilliant stroke to defang the Libyans and the Polisario, and it worked," said a Western diplomat in an interview.

Polisario officials based in Algiers discount Morocco's claims of a successful wall strategy. They say relentless assaults on the ramparts have left thousands of Moroccan soldiers dead.

But Western military experts in Rabat, Morocco's capital, view such claims as highly exaggerated. They note that the construction of every new section of the wall has pushed Polisario forces farther back into the desert.

Though Moroccan forces occasionally pursue Polisario guerrillas into neutral but weak Mauritania, King Hassan has given his troops strict orders not to test the principle of hot pursuit into Algeria, whose armed forces outnumber those of Morocco's by at least 3-to-1.

"Our defense consists of driving the Polisario back to their own bases," Bennani said. "We don't want war to engulf North Africa. We want to stop a war, not start one."

One of the wall's main benefits has been a reduction of tension and economic uncertainty in southern Morocco. In the port city of La-youn, until last year a frequent target for Polisario attacks, a new Club Med opened this week featuring scuba-diving and overnight trips with Jeeps into the desert.

"Everyone knows Club Meds are crazy places, but I don't think they would make one here unless they were sure that wall was keeping the Polisario out," Bennani said.